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Antiquity and Survival

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The People of the Lake

BY CYNTHIA FAIN

The Author of this article has just published at Arthaud's in Paris a book with some thirty illustrations, entitled Bolivie [1]). *Her husband was recently French Ambassador in La Paz for two and a half years, and she was thus enabled to acquire a thorough knowledge of the country. She is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and a member of the Société Française des Explorateurs and of the Comité du Film Ethnographique du Musée de l'Homme. This article was written following an expedition directed by professor* Jehan Vellard *to film an Uru village near Lake Titicaca* [2]).

[Footnotes appear on p. 303-C - Ed.]

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101 Professor VELLARD from the University of San
114 Marco, Lima, had been working for some time on the Uru living in a hamlet named Iru Itu near the juncture of the river Desaguadero and Lake
12 Titicaca. He was of the opinion that this group were
174 the last survivors of the original population of the South American continent, certain authorities contend that they originally came up from the Amazon as they have a number of linguistic affinities with
197 certain Amazonian tribes. Their language is known as *Pukina* and is thought to be akin to *Arawak*, the great linguistic stock of South-eastern America.
174 Once having reached the highlands, what regions did they populate? There is a belief that they ex-
[361] tended along the banks of the Desaguadero as far as Lake Popo and were the founders of Oruro, which corresponds to the Uru words 'Uru uru',
[177] meaning "many Uru". But at an unknown date they were dominated, but never assimilated, by the
175 Aymara. One of the earlier Spanish chroniclers,
[361] DON PEDRO MERCADO DE PEÑALOSA, in a report dated 1586 in the Province of Pacajes, notes the presence, near the Desaguadero, of Uru, natives of the lake, where they were fishermen. He holds
[348] them in low esteem, remarking that they have no
[351] talent as agriculturists, and adds the revealing piece

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of information: "the Incas refused to teach them the sun-worship, being content to receive a tribute of fish and baskets", and elsewhere it is said that either from a hygienic standpoint, or to occupy their leisure moments, the Incas demanded yearly a reed filled with lice. Threehundred and fifty years later, the situation has remained unchanged. Their secret mythology, which Professor VELLARD has studied, is extremely nebulous and confused. The Uru consider themselves to be the first race of pre-humans whose blood is not red. They had long legs, long heads and they never suffered from the cold or damp of the lake. There followed successive creations intermingled with cataclysms, far from the sun's rays, and a deluge; among all the peoples only the Uru, the Kaote-ake, the People of the Lake, survived, but subsequently other races appeared, the Wone-ake, who cultivated the earth and were their enemies, and who vanquished them.

The Uru appear from earliest times to have been an accursed race, an unfortunate people forever oppressed, taking refuge in a form of passive hostility. „They are brute beasts", remarks Father ACOSTA in

[113]

1) See Review in the corresponding section of this issue.
2) See also: VELLARD, JEHAN: *Dieux et Parias des Andes, Les Ourous*. Paris, Editions Emile-Paul, 1954.

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his *Historia y Moral de las Indias*, and this opinion is repeated by others. But I am under the impression that they are an unhappy race living during centuries among hostile populations, oppressed and ill-treated, finding consolation in their age-old traditions. They have nearly come to the end of their human cycle on the shores of the lake which, to them, is a holy site. Some strange belief forbids these fishermen to learn to swim, perhaps Titicaca claims from time to time a sacrifice to which they must freely consent.

Professor Vellard had arranged with KENNETH WASSON, the Director of Bolivia Films, to make a colour-documentary with some sound records on the Uru. He suggested that I might join them in the capacity of a photographer. Kenneth had his two assistants, JORGE ROJAS and AUGUSTO ROCA, and a young professor, RICHARD ARBELOT was also included in the expedition. As the length of time required to make the film was uncertain — the aptitude of the Uru for movie-work being an unknown quantity — we thought it wise to take some provisions. I suggested including a Primus stove, but the professor said we could heat our food on one of the village fires. The nights at nearly 14.000 ft. are apt to be extremely cold, so providing ourselves with sleeping bags, rugs and a quantity of photographic material, we set out early one sunny winter morning.

Our road led past the ruins of Tiahuanacu. The site is extensive and was an important Aymara religious and political centre. It remains one of the most interesting pre-Columbian monuments known in South America, but not by any means the oldest, the architectural remains and tombs of the coastal civilizations of Perú date from a far earlier period, and it is certain that the same applies to sites in Columbia. Naturally, the most extravagant theories are extant as to its origin, one of the most popular myths being that at the period of the mythical Atlantis it had been a seaport, Brazil and the Amazon being supposedly under the sea; but less romantic and

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more reliable authorities have dated Tiahuanacu about the ninth century; thanks to the recent C_{14} investigations, we shall doubtless in the near future be able to obtain precise information on the subject. The site appears to date from two periods; the ponderous and primitive monoliths have little relation with the finely sculptured "Gate of the Sun".

It is conceivable that at the period of its construction Tiahuanacu was considerably nearer the lakeside than at the present day, but in many cases lakes have been known to shrink in a remarkably short space of time. The lake of Guanacache in upper Argentina, now very small, was within living memory a large navigable extense of water. There is in the church of Tiahuanacu village an early colonial painting showing a boat skirting the edge of the lake beneath willow-trees, with a wooded background; at present there is not a tree in the landscape. It is possible that the climate of the region may have suffered certain modifications. "Practically nothing is known of the Aymara Empire, except that it extended over a considerable territory as far as Northern Argentina and down to Arica on the Peruvian coast. Certain place-names are of Aymara origin and their well-shaped, finely decorated vases are found in Ecuador and as far north as Central America. The conventional geometric style of decoration gives the impression of a people organized and disciplined, but the only important relic of the past is their language, very rich in technical terms, suitable for the expression of abstract ideas, clear and concise, a language which denotes a long evolution towards a high standard of civilization" [3]). When the Incas arrived with their Quechua followers from the region of Urubamba about the eleventh century, they conquered the country, but the Aymara population remained, retaining their language, their customs and their distinctive physique.

We stop for a moment at the village church which

[113] [3]) BAUDIN, LOUIS: *L'Empire Socialiste des Incas*. Paris, 1928.

[TEXT CONTINUES ON P. 309-A]

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Fig. 1: The Uru lady who by unanimous consent had taken upon herself the role of local parliamentary candidate.

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Fig. 2: The village church.

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Fig. 3: Our leading lady and her mother, who was perhaps the oldest human being I have ever seen.

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Fig. 4:
An Uru fisherman.

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Fig. 5: Uru woman sitting in front of her house.

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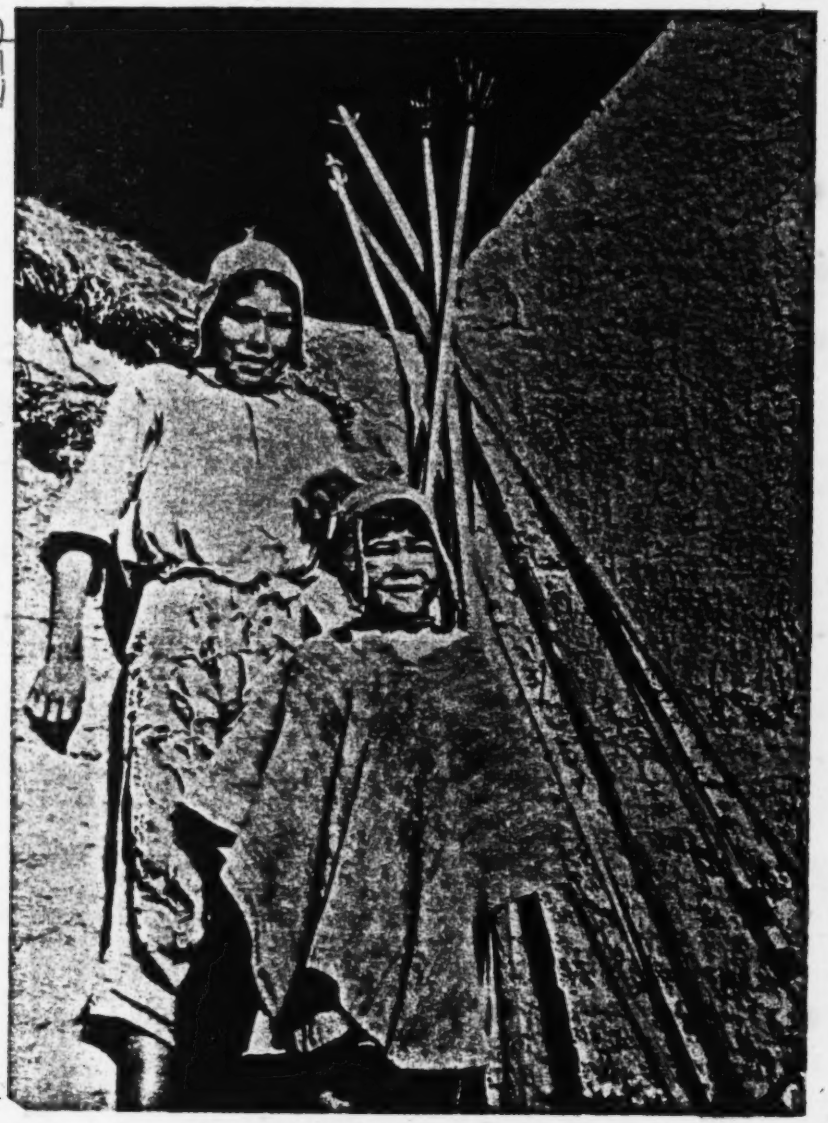

Fig. 6: Leaning against the wall were two boys 11 or 12 years old.

A 346 We stop for a moment at the village, church which
[778] is protected, like our temples in the Far East, by a guardian god in the form of one of the monoliths
A 346 taken from Tiahuanacu. The early paintings in their
353 charming frames are in bad condition and some
358 much-needed repairs were proceeding on the roof; there is an embossed silver altar as we find them even in small villages in the highlands of Bolivia,
A and a rather decayed but well-proportioned gilded
782 baroque pulpit. As we were about to leave, an Indian
788 woman entered. She held in one hand her bowler hat and in the other a bottle of alcohol. Having made a deep genuflection she presented the bottle to a statue of the Virgin, crossed herself, kissed her thumb,
U and was gone.
114 We followed the road towards the lake till we came
487 to a cart-track which seemed to run parallel with the Desaguadero river as it flows out of the lake. After a short distance the track ended. The professor said: "We just go straight ahead keeping the river in sight". The ground was strewn with boulders and clumps of spiky grass, the two cars heaved and rolled; finally we disembarked the photographic material and followed on foot, the professor like the Pied Piper leading the procession. The cinema material represented a considerable weight which at that height seemed twice as heavy. For two hours we gasped and stumbled along; finally nearing the river we heard a dog barking and saw a small adobe
U house inhabited by a raucous bad-tempered woman
[361] of uncertain age who sent us to the devil. We panted
U up a little hill, and on the other side there appeared
114 a number of small adobe houses. The professor was still in full cry, striding ahead heedless of the panting group to the rear. But finally realizing that there
U is a limit to human endurance, he gave way grace-
123 fully, and we had lunch. The meal being dispatched,
622 we approached the village, where Vellard called on the mayor, and, accompanied by a number of the
U
124 inhabitants, joined us. He explained that we must go to the house of the local centenarian, where we should film her, her daughter Jesusa and her son-in-law of some eighty-odd years.

[i.e., the village of Tiahuanacu --Analyst]

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[124] [126] in-law of some eighty-odd years. While they talked the purest of pure Uru we could make a sound-recording.

[363] A badly bombed area of London is in good repair compared with the Uru streets. Finally having climbed over crumbling walls and fallen into deep holes, we arrived at the house. Seated against the wall in the sun was perhaps the oldest human being I have ever seen. The mayor who spoke fluent Spanish said she was well over a hundred. Had she been less deaf and more comprehensible, I am sure we should have discovered that she had waved to General Sucre during the wars of the Liberation. Seated on the low wall was the daughter, a young seventy. The mayor explained what we wanted. The centenarian mumbled, but Roca's efforts with the recorder were unsuccessful. We left her to provide local colour and material for photographs of the most amazing wrinkles. The son-in-law seemed completely inert, so turning to the daughter the mayor asked her to talk. Realizing that a unique occasion was offered her probably after a lifetime of oppression, she settled herself firmly on a solid piece of wall, and the floodgates of Uru eloquence opened. She launched forth into what was apparently her life-history, accompanied by the most extraordinary mime. Mother, who was past seeing, hearing and still less, caring, continued to mutter, the husband, when the recital became particularly spirited, would stop chewing his *coca,* lift his head and open his mouth, but no sound issued forth. Apparently the mechanism had definitely run down, and he relapsed again into a state of ruminating coma. Encouraged by the general enthusiasm, our star became more and more expansive. By now most of the inhabitants had arrived on the scene, and judging by the expression on the faces of the other ladies, she had by unanimous consent taken upon herself the role of local parliamentary candidate. She held the audience spellbound for one and a quarter hours, when either her vocal cords relaxed or she had come momenta-

[191] [165] [126] [276]

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rily to the end of her recital. She stopped quite suddenly and demanded some coca, informing us that the next meeting was scheduled to take place the following morning, when "she hoped to tell us a great many interesting facts".

By this time the light was going, so we decided that it would be wise to settle the question of our night's quarters. The mayor gallantly offered me his house; fortunately on our way to the meeting we had passed by, and I had seen all that was necessary to confirm me in my decision to sleep in the car. Protesting that alone I could not take up the whole house, I nobly waved my rights in favour of worthier and braver guests. Kenneth, Rojas and Roca, not having sleepingbags, decided that bugs were preferable to frostbite, so fell in with the mayor's offer. It was decided we would use his house as our dining-room; I therefore made my way thither with the supplies.

Night was falling, a cold wind blowing in little sharp gusts across the great empty *puna*, the hut was lit with a lantern that someone had brought. The five men were sitting huddled in *ponchos* or great-coats on the bed, which was made of a bamboo frame covered with rushes and llama skins. The atmosphere was constrained, as we spread the food on the rough table. I said: "Now we shall go and heat this beef over a fire". They suddenly burst out simultaneously in English, French and Spanish: "There is no fire in the village and there is nothing to make one from". The only combustible in use on the Altiplano is dried llama-dung or *yareta* [4]). This latter is too expensive for the poverty-stricken Uru, and they have not enough llamas, if any, to provide a sufficient provision of dung.

Sadly and silently we ate our icy food. A bottle of rum brought a certain comfort. As the village had retired for the night at sundown, we decided to retire to our respective quarters.

[4]) Yarema, a fungus which grows just under the earth and is common to all this part of the Altiplano. It is dug up and dried and forms an excellent combustible. It generally replaces coal.

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retire to our respective quarters. Before leaving, I arranged the remaining provisions, carefully propping up a thermos containing our precious hot coffee for the morning. I have but few manias, the principal one being to brush my teeth. I therefore hunted for a bottle of water and found it empty. My hygienic preocupations vastly amused my companions, and someone offered me a bottle of lager. Not wishing to lose face I accepted, declaring that there was no better mouthwash, but feeling secretly rather sick at the idea of a combination of colgate and beer. But on carrying out the experiment, I found out that there *is* no better mouthwash in existence. By now the moon was high and full, and so strong was the light that finding it impossible to sleep I switched on the engine for heat, as in spite of my vicuña-lined sleepingbag, the cold was intense. I read for an hour or so, which gave me such a headache, that I had to take aspirin with the remaining beer. The next morning Abelot and I wound our way down to the river, which was frozen at the edge. We broke the ice, drew some water and washed, much to the surprise of the villagers. Again I brushed my teeth with the last drops of beer before the astonished gaze of the people who had never seen such a strange exhibition.

Arriving at the mayor's, we found the rest of the company singularly unglamorous and, o tragedy, someone had kicked over the thermos of coffee. We ate some apples and biscuits, but our depression melted away in the brilliant sun. The sky was blue as it is only to be seen on the Roof of the World. While the professor went off to take some sound-recordings, we explored the village. There was practically no sign of animal life or cultivation. This was normal, as the Aymara peasants refuse to allow the Uru, whom they consider as pariahs, to cultivate the ground. They have a narrow strip of shore on which to build their *balsas*.

We returned by the little church. Very occasionally a priest comes over from Guaqui on the lake. There

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Fig. 7: The [illegible] with their tall pointed bows, have the gracefulness of gondol[illegible].

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Fig. 8: An Uru house made of adobe and covered with rushes.

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Fig. 9: The mayor of Iru Itu, who spoke fluent Spanish.

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346 There
[996] were some withered Palm-Sunday decorations made from the rushes which border the river. They were plaited and twisted and fringed and hung on rusty nails. The door stood partially open. A low adobe-wall surrounded the building. There were no tombs in evidence. A family of donkeys had taken [231] up their residence there. We gave them some biscuit and apple, and they followed us down the stony 126 path to where the village was assembled. The cameras were ticking, and our chauffeur Carlos had been promoted to stagehand with a wooden clapper. Our star was continuing her role with renewed enthusiasm; leaning against the wall were two boys 11 or 12 years old, one had beautiful smooth regular features. I photographed him, but he never moved, nor seemed conscious of our presence. We left him [396] standing motionless and followed the younger one [283] down to the river where a man was plaiting rushes, preparatory to making a balsa.

824 Some fifteen years ago the whole region suffered [731] from a severe draught. The waterlevel of the lake descended from twelve to fifteen feet and many of the marshes dried out, and the reeds, the *totora*, withered and disappeared. These totoras play as important a part among the Uru as the llama among [501] the Aymara or Quechua on the Altiplano. While the [267] stems are used for making balsas, sails and ropes, [203] the roots or *kzouras* are the staple diet of the Uru, who also use it to brew a kind of beer, allowing the tubercles to ferment.

132 Fortunately in these last few years the climatic con-
137 ditions have once more returned to normal, and with the rise of the lake the totoras have once more in-
501 creased. These rafts, with their tall pointed bows, have the gracefulness of a gondola. They are composed of three cylinders, two forming the sides and
396 one the centre. The rushes are plaited into long
283 braids, the end being held between the man's toes. These braids are then plaited together and together again, and all these ropes are assembled, moistened and laced together. Two men work simultaneously,

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Two men work simultaneously
396 [983] [912] tightening the braids with little wooden hooks, taking care that the two parallel cylinders have exactly the same size and weight, so that the balsa will not capsize. Herein lies the art of balsa-building. While the construction is in progress, a third man waters the cylinders, so that the reed remains [412] slightly damp. For hours on end they tighten the cords, and with a little stone hammer they tap the braids together so that they end by forming a substance hard as wood. The balsa is then turned over, the two pointed ends are placed in holes in the ground, and earth is tightly packed around them, so that they may keep their form. Here they remain for several days, afterwards they are taken out, and a hole is made in which the mast is placed, and the 501 reed sail is attached to it by three cords. In the very small balsa the fisherman holds a stick to which a little sail is attached. The large balsas measure between twenty-one and twenty-five feet. They draw about forty cms. of water and can carry from eight to ten passengers. The small balsa is about seven feet long and carries two passengers. When not using a sail, they employ a long double paddle, or a punt-pole when circulating among the rushes. The [961] [132] life of the balsa is short: they are built in three or four days, but they are rarely deemed safe for use on the lake, where storms are frequent for more than six months in the year. Generally they end their days as punts which keep to the edge of the lake among the rushes.

126 123 The cameras were set up, and I took photographs and then wandered up the river, where suddenly I perceived the raucous lady, who was if possible even more insulting than on the previous day. Seeing the camera, which she doubtless took for the eye of Satan, she flung a stone which missed me by yards, [788] [201] and, uttering more curses, fled, making the sign of the cross and at the same time keeping her fingers crossed, so as to be well on the safe side with all the 126 forces of the supernatural. We had by now filmed and photographed the population from almost every

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126 angle. The professor was taking chest- and head-
114 measurements and making notes. We lunched,
123 giving the remains to the children, who looked so-
252 mewhat suspiciously at cold ham, tomatoes and cake,
and hid it away in their skirts. As we reached the
car, we saw a thin column of smoke, and, sure
enough, the village cooking fire was alight. Owing
[511] to the poverty of the village, they have only enough
fuel to light about one fire every day or every two
[091] days. Two girls in scarlet skirts, little cotton jackets
which had once been pink, and dusty battered bow-
ler hats, crouching on all fours, played the part of
[415] bellows. The youngest, remarkably pretty and re-
markably dirty, ran into the house and emerged drag-
114 ging a large iron pot. My thirst for ethnology was
satiated and I felt sure that Vellard had already gone
into the question of Uru cooking, and that further

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temptation should not be placed in his way. I drove hurriedly down to the mayor's house and told the others that I personally felt that another twenty-four hours of hunger and thirst, while the professor studied Uru cooking, was an unattractive prospect. One of the boys wanted to go to Guaqui, so we took him as guide. He directed us along quite a respectable track, which we had missed by a few hundred yards. As we passed the raucous lady's abode she hailed us with a volley of oaths. She had kept a stone in readiness, which, her anger impeding her accuracy, fell wide by a long distance. We finally joined the main highway to La Paz and almost immediately went down with a flat tire. Carlos opened the trunk and as he lifted the jack, out toppled the little Primus-stove. We looked at each other, and swiftly and silently, we pushed it back into oblivion.

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